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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000011

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TAGS: PREL PINS ASEC KPAL EG SY

SUBJECT: PROTESTERS HARASSING EGYPTIAN EMBASSY IN DAMASCUS,
RELATIONS WITH SYRIA SOUR

Classified By: Classified by CDA Maura Connelly for reasons 1.5 b and d

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¶1. (C) Summary: Charge called on Egyptian Ambassador Shawky Ismail December 31 to compare notes and express solidarity. Ismail reviewed his Embassy's security problems, accused Syria of coordinating with Tehran and Hizballah to exploit the Gaza crisis, and explained Egypt's proposal for moving to a permanent ceasefire. Ismail predicted a heated discussion at December 31 Arab League ministerial in Cairo, noting that Syria and Qatar were trying to escalate the crisis and further inflame Arab public opinion. Thus far, however, only nine AL members had responded positively to Syrian-Qatari calls for an AL summit. Ismail noted Turkish PM Erdogan's visit today to Damascus, which would include a meeting with Hamas Politburo leader Khaled Meshaal. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Security lacking: Ismail confirmed that there had been several protests (around 30-40 people) in front of the Egyptian Embassy in the last several days. (Note: Located on a busy thoroughfare, the Egyptian Embassy has little setback and is more exposed than our own.) Ismail reported he had called the MFA Chief of Protocol the previous morning to express concern about a planned protest and had asked the MFA to reinforce the Embassy's security. Later the same evening, protesters began throwing rocks and liquid containers (presumed to hold flammable fluids) at the embassy. As the incident was taking place, Ismail called the MFA again to complain, to no avail. No one was hurt, but the message was clear. Security personnel tried to keep the protesters back from the main entrance, but they made no efforts to disperse the crowd, which Ismail interpreted as tacit SARG permission for the protests. Ismail reported he had called in person that morning on the Chief of Protocol to express his displeasure. Additionally, the Egyptian MFA called in Syria's Ambassador to Egypt several times to protest. Ismail admitted he and his staff felt secure in their residences but not in the embassy. (Comment: We can relate, but thus far protesters have not been allowed near our embassy.)

¶3. (C) Egyptian Humanitarian Relief and Syrian Propaganda: Ismail recounted President Mubarak's December 30 national address calling on Israel to cease hostilities immediately and reviewing Egypt's humanitarian contributions. Egypt had opened Rafah for a limited time, provided medical supplies and treatment to many injured Palestinians, and transported many needy cases to hospitals in Cairo. Ismail

compared Egypt's considerable humanitarian relief contributions, which had gone unnoticed by the Syrian press, to the "three Syrian trucks" carrying supplies through Jordan. One Egyptian security official had died and others had been injured after Israeli military forces blew a hole in the border wall while attacking suspected tunnel sites. Yet Syrian officials and media had the nerve to accuse Egypt of collusion with Israel's military operation, fumed Ismail.

¶4. (C) Syrian Cooperation with Tehran and Hizballah: Ismail said Egyptian-Syrian relations, already tense, had worsened since the Israeli military operation in Gaza began December 27. Syria was coordinating with Tehran and Hizballah to inflame Arab public opinion and put pressure on moderate Arab states to adopt their radical agenda. Protests against Egyptian diplomatic facilities had occurred in Tehran, Amman, Aden, and Beirut, in addition to those in Damascus. Ismail assessed Iran and Syria were interested in gaining a foothold in Gaza. The Syrian media was "slanders" Egypt by replaying footage of Israeli FM Livni's December 25 visit to Cairo. Meanwhile, FM Muallim was attempting to portray himself as a mediator between Hamas and Israel. "That's our role," exclaimed Ismail. (In an aside, Ismail noted "Saudi Arabia's silence" on Gaza and reported there had been a small protest in front of the Saudi Embassy here.)

¶5. (C) Egypt's Cease-Fire Plan: According to Ismail, Egypt is promoting plan consisting of four phases: (1) a permanent ceasefire; (2) extension of the June 19 truce between Hamas and Israel; (3) opening of land crossings in conformity

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with the 2005 AMA, with international guarantees the crossings won't be closed (enforced by European and PA monitors); and (4) eventually returning to Palestinian reconciliation talks. Egyptian FM Aboul Gheit had coordinated closely with Turkey and European countries and would be pushing this agenda at the AL ministerial in Cairo. Ismail said Cairo objected to the Syrian proposal for a "humanitarian pause," because the GOE agreed with the US that a permanent ceasefire made more sense as a first step.

¶6. (C) Arab League Summit? Ismail said Syria and Qatar were still pushing an AL Summit in Doha. Support among AL members was not yet overwhelming, with Sudan, Syria, the Palestinian Authority, Djibouti, Comoros Islands, and Yemen responding favorably to the idea of holding a summit. (It was unclear if all of these countries were prepared to attend a summit on January 2, as initially proposed by Qatar and Syria.) Egypt's position was that there should not be an AL summit without proper preparation and the guaranteed attendance of at least 14 members. Abu Mazen, Ismail surmised, "had no choice" but to agree in principle to attend the summit if it were to take place. Ismail assessed the chances for holding a summit as "difficult."

¶7. (C) Turkish PM in Town: Ismail noted PM Erdogan was in Damascus for a day-stop and would be meeting President Asad and Khaled Meshaal. His trip would include stops in Jordan (with meetings with King Abdullah and Abu Mazen), and Cairo. Ismail said he understood Erdogan's mission was to continue playing a mediation role in the Middle East. He would be promoting the idea of a ceasefire, renewed truce, and a reopening of border crossings, and discussions between Fatah and Hamas, according the Ismail.

¶8. (C) Comment: The usually reserved Ismail pulled no punches in expressing his frustration with the SARG's lack of response to his concerns about embassy security. We offered to make our RSO available to compare notes in dealing with the security services, but Ismail demurred. He was uncharacteristically candid on the state of deteriorating Egyptian-Syrian relations. Ismail told us his access to Syrian officials was extremely limited and that recent exchanges had been unpleasant. Ismail's distaste for

Damascus may be amplified by the fact that he sees his
children, who were former students at the now closed American
School, only during their holiday breaks from boarding school
in Cairo.

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